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ABSTRACT

This paper commends qualitative assessment as a significant alternative to standardized testing to determine language proficiency, placement, and instruction for ethnic first and second language adult learners in postsecondary education. Standardized tests and traditional language curriculum and methodology are rigid in instructional scope and sequence, measuring individual learning against a group of first language learners of a particular culture. However, qualitative assessment recognizes that oral and written language learning are impelled by social, cultural, linguistic, and psychological needs and choices prevalent in particular, but diverse language communities. Inquiries into bilingual development that examine family settings, employment, consumer practices and community residence augment the instructor's perceptions of realistic kinds of literacy learning and usage for ethnic minority adult students. Under the influence of qualitative assessment, individual learning is measured against the performance of group tendencies marked by similar backgrounds and classroom experiences rather than against an idealized and unrelated cultural group. Qualitative assessment places a new emphasis on learner attitudes and expectations ignored by standardized tests. (CS)

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QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF ETHNIC MINORITY ADULT STUDENTS

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November 18, 1987

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The greater the hold of standardized testing in post secondary education in the United States, the greater is the need for qualitative assessment of diverse learners. The limitations of standardized language proficiency tests for ethnic minority adult students are well known to experienced language educators in the Southwest. Every semester language educators working in community colleges along the United States border confront increasing student enrollment marked by diverse histories of public schooling, first and second language development, and United States residency. The wide diversity cannot be assessed solely by reading and writing competencies used for financial aid, placement, and instruction. Mandatory competencies or "quality controls" (Goelman, H., A. Oberg, and F. Smith, 1980) for instruction and learning have little grounding in recent language research. Numerical values resulting from standardized tests do not substantiate the validity of literacy tests but do underestimate the human potential for language learning among large groups of ethnic minority adult students in the Southwest. The content in standardized tests is based on

prescriptive kinds of written language usage and, consequently, educators who rely on them have to presuppose the existence of homogenous reading and writing instruction in public schools throughout the United States. As a result, under this influence literacy learning and usage for ethnic minority adults tend to be perceived as a product of early childhood schooling predominately and, as such, the upper limits of future learning. Due to much documentation about the poor quality of learning in elementary and secondary schooling for certain ethnic groups, adult education's commitment to equal educational opportunity is undermined. In classroom instruction the prevalence of standardized testing and placement procedures transfer literacy learning and usage into a closed system with little relationship to whole language or to bilingual functioning because little or no credit is given to language learning outside of school. Consequently, language instruction in adult education for large numbers of ethnic minority adult students becomes motivated primarily by the need for remediation or filling in the gaps of early schooling. The sophisticated cognitive functioning that evolves as a natural outcome of learning oral and written language of the primary language community is minimized by beliefs that literacy learning in school causes the development of "higher order" cognitive skills (Scribner and Cole, 1978, November). Ironically then, the benefits of language instruction in school are reserved for language users who

have already mastered test-taking and the prestige language prior to enrollment. This kind of dilemma facing language educators in community colleges and developmental education in particular, can be resolved to an extent by merging quantification measures with qualitative assessment. This assessment should be grounded in sound theory and research to transform numerical scores into meaningful indices for language instruction and learning. The process and product of qualitative assessment in the El Paso Community College evolved from the researcher's two decades of classroom experience in language instruction for first and second language adult learners and from recent research conducted in and out of classroom settings.

Qualitative assessment is a significant alternative for placement and language instruction for ethnic minorities enrolling in post secondary education because it is grounded in interrelated studies of language learning and usage conducted among different language communities. In every society around the world normal births eventuate in learning the language or languages used in a specific language community long before the age of formal schooling in Western societies. In those social groups where written communication fulfills a perceived need to accomplish social life, language users of different ages do not have to enroll in formal schooling to learn that print is meaningful or that written symbols are intimately related to spoken language. In ethnographic studies of literacy learning and

usage preschool children (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1981 and 1984) and self-professed "illiterates" (Herrera, 1986) found evidence for the deployment of sophisticated and diverse kinds of strategies which developed as a natural outcome of social life and oral language learning. Specifically, an ethnographic study of adult "illiterates" residing in a large border community revealed that limited schooling histories in Mexico and in the United States did not result in social incompetency. A reading task and an excursion to commercial centers demonstrated high degrees of consumer acumen in Spanish and English for the type of print prevalent in supermarkets and department stores in the large border city. This type of recent language research studies among different groups of first and second language learners strongly implies that language learning transcends purely cognitive implications. Universally, oral and written language learning are impelled by social, cultural, linguistic, and psychological needs and choices prevalent in particular language communities. The range of needs and choices for language learning is manifested in diverse uses for oral and written communication determined by sociocultural variation (Heath and Winter, 1980). Because language usage is the principal means of accomplishing social life it is not realistic to believe that language learning is restricted to classroom settings.

Qualitative assessment offers alternatives to the sole reliance on standardized testing in post secondary education

for high risk populations such as ethnic minority adult students. Moreover, a greater understanding of the underpinnings of qualitative assessment can greatly augment instructors' perceptions of realistic kinds of literacy learning and usage for diverse groups who enter community colléges located along the Southwest border. In placement procedures conducted by the instructor low numerical scores on standardized tests correlate with limited schooling experience instead of cognitive deficiencies or cultural deprivation. For instance, for older groups of adult immigrants from Mexico entry into a community college usually marks the first direct experience with school in the United States. Also, large numbers of older immigrants are likely to have very limited or nonexisting histories of primary schooling in Mexico. In these cases inquiries into different histories of bilingual development among family members, employment, consumer practices, and United States residency offer various avenues for gauging prior knowledge of oral and written communication in English and Spanish. Otherwise, a primary reliance on numerical scores makes for a predominance of instruction and methods more akin to early childhood instuction which can be irrelevant and time consuming for adults with pragmatic and immediate needs for second language learning. In instruction qualitative assessment schemes have proved highly effective in devising realistic assessments of individual learning among diverse groups. A traditional kind of curriculum, methodology, and

assessment is tied to a rigid scope and sequence of textbook instruction to the detriment of group diversity characteristic of second language learners. Individual learning therefore is measured against a group of first language learners who are very familiar with a particular culture. An understanding of qualitative assessment implies knowledge of how language systems work and change over time and place. As a result, under the influence of qualitative assessment developmental learning comes to replace traditional goals for mastery learning. As a consequence, individual learning can be measured against the performance of group tendencies marked by similar backgrounds and classroom experiences rather than an idealized group. Another advantage of using qualitative assessment together with quantitative measures for placement and language instruction for ethnic minority adult students is the new emphasis possible on learner attitudes and expectations which standardized language tests ignore completely. Learner attitudes have gained importance to students of literacy learning and usage in diverse language communities (Glick, 1974; Akinnaso, 1981). Research conducted in natural settings outside of school can't help but view whole language functioning which shows the effects of psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic forces at work in different communities. In the ethnographic study of adult "illiterates" a range of adverse learner attitudes for English language learning have helped to explain various

learning disruptions which had previously been credited to "deficiencies." Studies of attitudes and expectations typical of diverse groups of language users can work to modify adverse learner attitudes during instruction for the purpose of increasing learner control over the learning process. Furthermore, qualitative assessments enhance language instruction for ethnic minority adult students because the process of learning and language usage are emphasized over the product of instruction and testing. Instructors become sensitized to highs and lows of language learning and, subsequently, creative kinds of materials and methods emerge to facilitate effective adaptation and accommodation of new knowledge to prior knowledge for students with varying numerical test scores. Finally, qualitative assessment permits instruction and learning to utilize oral and written communication in English and Spanish whether or not textbooks permit this practice. For ethnic minority adult students entering post secondary education the first language represents a history of accomplished language learning and a resource of social experience important to the classroom.

In conclusion, qualitative assessment based on research in and out of school in border communities is highly recommended because it offers innovative kinds of language instruction and methods for ethnic minority adult students. The theories and studies which support qualitative assessment are relevant because they stress language and

learning. The writers are convinced of the need for "ethnographic monitoring" (Hymes, 1979) for language educators of diverse groups of students because language instruction for ethnic minority adult students requires high quality placement, assessment, and instruction based on sound theory and research rather than on long standing conventions of edumetrics.

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